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ABSTRACT

Funding of college union and student activities programs by local and national companies is discussed. While a great many colleges use corporate sponsorship to some extent, an issue is which corporate sponsors should be used and how. Colleges rely on four major types of corporate sponsorship: companies may offer (1) a specific amount for a specific program, (2) a lump sum donation, (3) a product or service, and (4) prepackaged programs. Most union and activities administrators use corporate sponsorship because it enables them to produce programs not otherwise possible. Others see corporate sponsorship as a way to improve relations with surrounding communities. Another view is that corporate sponsorship is an outgrowth of the university practice of asking for corporate donations in academic areas. Some student union and activities organizations review upcoming activities and match sponsors with specific programs, while in other cases, the companies approach the union. Retaining control is important to most campus administrators. A key question centers on whether by accepting products, money, or services from corporate sponsors, union and activities organizations endorse those sponsors. Views of a number of student affairs staff about corporate support and approaches they follow are identified. (SW)

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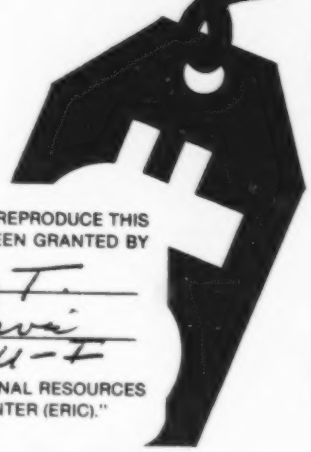

Is there a price to pay?

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Laurel Markey Hahn

Mention corporate sponsorship to a college union or student activities professional, and visions of golden arches on the roof or beer companies' banners over the front door immediately come to mind. Or do they?

Touted as a hot topic in the field today, corporate sponsorship is an issue familiar to almost everyone who works with union or student activities programming. We decided to find out what you think of it and how you handle it.

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Searching for creative solutions to budget cuts and financial pressures sometimes requires looking off campus for help. Local and national companies are willing, often eager, to fund college union and student activities programs.

Does accepting money from corporations lead to a crisis of conscience for college union and student activities administrators? Does it compromise the union's mission? Is it viewed as "selling out" to selfish corporate interests?

Interestingly, acceptance of corporate sponsorship is not the issue; almost everyone uses corporate sponsorship to some extent and in some form. The controversy, if it can be called that, concerns which corporate sponsors should be used and how.

Colleges rely on four major types of corporate sponsorship: specific amount, lump sum, product, and prepackaged programs.

Specific amount for a specific program. Usually the organization needing the funding requests assistance from a corporation for a specific program. For example, the Lory Student Center at Colorado State University in Fort Collins received $10,000 from Mountain Bell for an international poster exhibition. This form of sponsorship seems to be the most universally used and accepted.

Lump sum donation. The company approaches the union or student organization with an offer of a lump sum donation in return for certain services or privileges. For instance, Budweiser offered the University of Wisconsin–Madison $30,000 to sponsor recreational sports. In return, Budweiser wanted, among other things, a Jeep with the Budweiser logo on it, Budweiser player of the week awards, and Budweiser T-shirts. (The University turned down the offer.)

College unions and student activities organizations appear to be

shying away from this form of sponsorship because of the obligations connected to large lump sum contributions.

Product or service. Corporations or local businesses can donate their products or services instead of dollars. For example, a local business loans Acadia University a truck and driver to help with drama productions. Pepsi donates soft drinks for a major program at California State Polytechnic University. Local radio stations offer free advertising for programs and services at Colorado State University.

This form of sponsorship seems to be the most disputed. Many schools never accept this type of sponsorship, while others accept this type and nothing else.

Prepackaged programs. The company develops its own program, which it circulates without charge to college unions around the country. Kodak offers photography exhibits; Miller Beer furnishes a multimedia marketing presentation; Pabst has a program on career counseling and job placement; and IBM sends art exhibits.

Not everyone considers such programs a form of corporate sponsorship. Several union directors or program advisers who said they used no corporate sponsors acknowledged using free prepackaged programs furnished by corporations.

A way to improve programs

Most union and activities administrators use corporate sponsorship because it enables them to produce programs they couldn't do otherwise, "or at least to do what they do better," said Pam Horne, assistant director of student organizations and programs at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Miller Brewing Company and the Wisconsin Union Board cosponsor Comedy Connection, a program that, according to Ted Crabb, director of the Wisconsin Union, would not be possible without Miller's support. Donations from local banks enabled Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., to replace scoreboards in its recreation center, a project that under ordinary circumstances would have taken several years, said John Cernech, vice president of student services.

Others see corporate sponsorship as a means of improving relations with surrounding communities. "We have the responsibility as a university to collaborate, to work with the larger community," said Mims Harris, associate director for programs at Colorado State University. John MacCuish, general manager of student services at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, sees the issue as one of community awareness and emphasizes asking local businesses to loan equipment, facilities, and personnel with specific expertise.

To still other administrators, corporate sponsorship is an outgrowth of the university practice of asking for corporate donations in academic areas. "What we're seeing now in student activities is a reflection of what universities are doing on a global scale," said Neil Gerard, director of the University Union at California State Polytechnic University in Pomona. "Universities are going to Hewlett-Packard and asking for computers or to IBM and asking for endowed chairs. Cosponsorship is a logical extension of what universities are doing."

Finding sponsors

Union and activities organizations obtain corporate sponsorships in different ways. MacCuish's organization uses a systematic approach, reviewing activities for the coming year and matching specific sponsors with specific programs. Harris develops proposals for certain programs and approaches appropriate companies.

In other cases, the companies approach the union. MaryJo Mertens, director of the Memorial Union at Arizona State University in Tempe, said corporate representatives tell the Activities Board what is available. The Board then can choose appropriate programs. "We have the final say-so, whether they can do it or not," Mertens said. "If I don't like the content of the program, I just tell them they can't do it."

Administrators agreed that retaining control is vital when working with corporate sponsors. This concept of control extends even to the words used; most people preferred *cosponsorship* to *sponsorship*. "The term corporate sponsorship implies a corporate sponsor of an event, that they have control over the content," Harris said.

The possibility of a sponsor gaining control of program content worries administrators who enter into agreements with corporate sponsors. "If you kind of do them ad hoc, they could get off the rails," MacCuish said. "You have to watch them. You lose control only if you allow control to be lost."

Other directors are concerned about reactions to corporate cosponsors. Michael Poe, director of the Chicago Illini Union at the University of Illinois, wants the identity of the program to remain with the union

and student activities and not with the sponsor. Harris said, "My concern is that as student activities programmers we don't relinquish our responsibility as being the sponsor of the program."

Controls

The administrator who accepts corporate cosponsorship also must exercise control over what the outside interests receive in return for their contributions. "The key issue is the degree to which the union maintains control over what is being sponsored and can control advertising for the program," Crabb said.

Most college union and student activities organizations regulate cosponsorships by developing a negotiated contract that details the amount or service the company will provide and what form the recognition will take. The agreement is reached and signed by both parties before the event occurs. Gerard's union goes a step further by holding an annual evaluation meeting with sponsors to be sure both sides are honoring their agreements.

Several universities have policies that student groups must follow when considering cosponsorships. The guidelines for the Indiana Memorial Union Board at Indiana University specify the committees that must approve the cosponsorship, the size allowed for the name or logo of the cosponsor on printed advertising media, and companies from whom corporate support will not be accepted (those that manufacture tobacco, firearms, or alcohol products). Guidelines at the University of Wisconsin–Madison are similar except they do not exclude manufacturers of certain products. The Wisconsin policy covers the entire campus. A student committee at Indiana University is in the process of drafting campus-wide guidelines.

Most college unions, however, prefer to handle cosponsorships on a case-by-case basis. Cleo Bash, director of the college union and student activities at California State University, Fresno, said that if the union director and university sets the policy, they have lost an educational opportunity by not letting the students debate individual programs and sponsors. "One of the things we do in student activities is teach students how to deal with ambiguities," Bash said, "and corporate sponsorship is full of ambiguities."

Others say that guidelines project the administration's views onto the entire union or campus, and that the original intent of unions as debating societies is being thwarted by denying specific companies access to campus.

Control is tight and centralized on some campuses, loose on others. Specified committees must approve requests for sponsorships at Indiana University and at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. However, at the University of Michigan and at California State University, Fresno, each student organization can pursue and authorize its own cosponsorships.

What cosponsors receive in return for support of programs varies from campus to campus. Indiana University allows only the sponsor's name or logo to appear on advertising media, and then only at half the size of the union's name. On the other hand, California State Polytechnic University has no objection to posters, banners, or fliers that identify the sponsors. Creighton University uses blank posters advertising Miller Beer to announce events not sponsored by Miller. Colorado State University may give the cosponsor complimentary tickets to an event, introduce the company's key personnel at a reception or opening, or mention the cosponsor's name in print media.

". . . the question always comes back to whether—by accepting products, money, or services from corporate sponsors—union and activities organizations endorse those sponsors."

Some of the issues

While most union directors and programmers accept corporate cosponsorships, some do rarely or not at all. Some universities simply don't need the additional funding corporate sponsors provide, and still others, such as Indiana University, are reluctant to subject students, staff, and faculty to too many vendors. Some state laws restrict the kinds of corporate sponsors that can be used; a Michigan law prohibits beer distributors from cosponsoring college and university programs and activities.

Michael Poe at the Chicago Illini Union uses cosponsorships sparingly. He says he doesn't want to rely on corporate sponsors for program funding because companies may decide in the future that the college market is no longer viable and the Union would lose financial support. Stephen Nelson, Dartmouth College's director of social activities, said of the reliance on corporate cosponsors: "I wouldn't want to see it become such a regular occurrence that it's like 'Who's on the billboard today?'"

Other schools rarely use corporate sponsorships, not necessarily

because they don't want to, but often because of state or institutional policy. Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, uses only prepackaged programs from corporations, said Wayne Woods, director of student activities. Because Iowa state law prohibits using activities money for scholarships, Kirkwood pursues corporate dollars for scholarships. To avoid jeopardizing their scholarship efforts, they do not request corporate funding for activities.

Where corporate donations are concerned at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, N.C., student activities take second place to the College Foundation, said Ross Surphlis, director of student activities. Central Piedmont has used prepackaged programs, Surphlis said, but the administration is concerned that corporations that contribute money to student activities won't give to the Foundation. Consequently, student organizations have been discouraged from actively soliciting contributions.

John Campbell, director of the student center at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., uses few prepackaged programs because the companies don't promote their programs to his school. "If I were more aware of them, I would probably use them," he said. Also, the nature of the Institute demands that Campbell guard against favoring one company over another lest the favored company promote that fact in its advertising.

Many administrators object to individual sponsors because of their products. Dartmouth College, Acadia University, and Indiana University do not accept beer sponsors, while Arizona State University, Colorado State University, and Creighton University do. Beer companies are supportive of responsible drinking or non-drinking functions, said Harris.

Others would decide whether or not to use a beer sponsor based on the program involved. Campbell, for example, would allow Miller Beer to cosponsor an alcohol awareness program but would not approve a Miller-sponsored program that would give away free beer or promote drinking.

Union directors are wary of what MacCuish calls "selling access to students." For example, Kodak runs a contest whose real purpose is to offer a union or student activities organization $500 to test students' reactions to a new camera. Ford Motor Company provides programmers with free films in exchange for permission to display new Ford cars on campus for market research purposes and to acquaint students with their products.

Peter Wall, assistant warden of Hart House at the University of Toronto, cited the problem of accepting money from companies with questionable pasts and practices, as did Nelson. "I would have problems taking money for a lecture series from a company that was involved in making antipersonnel weapons in a war like Vietnam," Nelson said. The big issue on MacCuish's campus this year is refusing sponsorships from companies that do business in South Africa.

On the other hand, Jay Boyar, director of college activities at Prince George's Community College in Largo, Md., said, "No one is squeaky clean by everyone's standards." According to Boyar, the question always comes back to whether—by accepting products, money, or services from corporate sponsors—union and activities organizations endorse those sponsors. Roger Wehrle, director of the Georgia Tech Student Center in Atlanta, asked if it is the union's job to prepare students for life, which includes future dealings with a variety of companies, "is it right to turn our backs on giving them access to these companies, knowledge of the companies?"

Student organizations in large public institutions appear to use corporate sponsorships more than those in small private institutions. Nelson believes one reason is the market size: "There are 25,000 students on large public campuses as opposed to my 4,000." Cernech said small private institutions use corporate sponsorship less because they don't have the staff or the time to work extensively with students in developing corporate contacts.

While almost everyone uses corporate sponsors to some extent, they all emphasize caution in giving corporate sponsors access to the lucrative campus market. Campbell said, "You have to use your discretion on what's too much and what's not enough." Mertens believes common sense tells administrators what they can and cannot do. MacCuish's motto is "Plan your work and work your plan." Nelson was a bit more pessimistic: "It may be OK 98 percent of the time, but the other 2 percent could cause real problems," he said. "I think it's the kind of thing that's always sitting there ready to blow up in your face."

Laurel Markey Hahn, editorial assistant for ACU-I from 1983 to 1986, has a bachelor's degree in journalism from Indiana University.